The Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee (1890): American Depoliticization and the Final Destruction of Lakota Autonomy

How the United States Weaponized Indigenous Spirituality to Justify Massacre and Forced Assimilation

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I. Introduction: The American Pattern of Colonial Depoliticization

On December 29, 1890, United States Army forces armed with Hotchkiss rapid-fire artillery guns opened fire on a band of approximately 350 Lakota Sioux at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota. Within minutes, approximately 300 Lakota—men, women, children, and elderly—lay dead or dying in the snow. The massacre was the culmination of a crisis that began when desperate, starving Native Americans turned to a spiritual movement called the Ghost Dance, which promised that ancestors would return, the buffalo would be restored, and the devastation wrought by American conquest would be reversed through supernatural intervention. The U.S. government and military transformed this spiritual movement into evidence of savage fanaticism and imminent rebellion, using it to justify military intervention, violent suppression, and intensified policies designed to destroy remaining Native political and cultural autonomy.

The Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee demonstrate that the colonial depoliticization pattern examined in the Xhosa cattle killing, Maji Maji rebellion, and Santhal rebellion was not unique to European powers operating in distant colonial territories. The same mechanisms operated within the United States as American authorities confronted Native American resistance to conquest and dispossession. The pattern was identical: erase material grievances produced by broken treaties and systematic exploitation, obsessively emphasize supernatural elements of resistance movements, declare Indigenous peoples mentally and culturally incapable of civilization, and justify violent suppression and forced assimilation as benevolent protection and necessary civilization.

This case study applies the analytical framework for understanding elite power and belief systems to reveal how the U.S. government weaponized the Ghost Dance movement to accomplish multiple objectives simultaneously: justify military intervention to crush remaining Native resistance, provide narrative cover for the Wounded Knee massacre, accelerate the

destruction of tribal land ownership through the Dawes Act and allotment policies, and construct permanent justifications for why Native Americans required forced assimilation rather than being allowed political autonomy or cultural preservation.

The Depoliticization Strategy in American Context

The depoliticization mechanism operated in the Ghost Dance case through the same four-step process visible in the colonial cases. First, American authorities systematically erased the material grievances that produced the Ghost Dance movement—particularly the starvation conditions created by deliberate ration cuts, the broken treaties that had confiscated Lakota lands, the extermination of the buffalo that destroyed the subsistence economy, and the reservation system that functioned as concentration camps denying Lakota autonomy and resources. These concrete, rational grievances were removed from official narratives and replaced with portrayals of inexplicable savage restlessness or manipulation by hostile chiefs.

Second, authorities obsessively emphasized the supernatural elements of the Ghost Dance—particularly the prophecy that ancestors would return and the claim that Ghost Shirts could protect wearers from bullets—while ignoring or minimizing the movement's explicitly pacifist teachings and its function as spiritual response to genocidal conditions. The emphasis transformed the Ghost Dance from a religious movement providing hope to desperate people into evidence of dangerous delusion and imminent violence. Media coverage dubbed it the "Messiah Craze" and portrayed participants as fanatics who had abandoned reason for supernatural fantasies.

Third, based on the supernatural beliefs, American authorities declared Native peoples fundamentally incapable of civilization and rationality, requiring permanent oversight and forced transformation. If they believed ancestors could return through spiritual dancing, they clearly lacked the mental capacity for self-governance or for maintaining their traditional ways of life in a modern world. The Ghost Shirts became permanent evidence in American discourse that Native Americans were superstitious savages who would believe impossible things and therefore needed to be forcibly civilized for their own good.

Fourth, the violence of Wounded Knee and the subsequent intensification of assimilation policies were justified as protecting Native Americans from themselves and from their own dangerous beliefs. The massacre was reframed from U.S. military atrocity against unarmed civilians into a tragic but necessary response to treacherous savages whose fanatical beliefs had made them dangerous. And the acceleration of allotment policies that broke up tribal lands and forced individual ownership was justified as saving Native Americans from the communal tribal systems that supposedly produced poverty and enabled prophets to mislead them into futile resistance.

Why This Case Matters: Domestic Application of Colonial Methods

The Ghost Dance case is crucial for understanding elite power and narrative control because it demonstrates that colonial depoliticization was not merely something distant European empires

imposed on foreign populations. The same mechanisms operated within the United States as American elites confronted resistance from populations they had conquered and dispossessed. The U.S. government in the 1890s functioned identically to British authorities in South Africa, German authorities in East Africa, and British authorities in India—using supernatural narratives associated with resistance movements to justify violent suppression and permanent political subjugation.

This reveals that depoliticization is not a characteristic of particular national or cultural traditions but is a systematic elite strategy deployed whenever convenient to transform political challenges into evidence of incapacity requiring domination. American authorities used the same methods British and German colonial authorities deployed because they faced similar problems—populations with legitimate grievances resisting dispossession and exploitation—and because the depoliticization mechanism served the same functions regardless of geographic or cultural context.

The case also reveals the hypocrisy of American narratives about civilization and progress. While criticizing European colonialism and positioning the United States as a beacon of freedom and democracy, American authorities were simultaneously deploying identical colonial methods against Native Americans: conquest, dispossession, forced cultural transformation, and narrative manipulation to justify genocide and political subjugation. The Ghost Dance weaponization demonstrates that American expansion westward was a colonial project using colonial methods, whatever national myths might claim about manifest destiny or civilizing missions.

Structure of This Study

This case study examines the Ghost Dance movement and Wounded Knee massacre through multiple analytical dimensions. Section II establishes the foundation conditions—the broken treaties, land confiscations, buffalo extermination, starvation, and reservation system that created desperate circumstances producing the Ghost Dance. Section III analyzes Wovoka's prophecy and the Ghost Dance movement itself, examining how it combined appropriation of existing religious practices with new prophetic claims, why it appealed to desperate populations, and how it was adapted as it spread among different tribes.

Section IV examines what the Ghost Dance actually threatened—not military uprising as authorities claimed but the psychological and cultural survival of Native peoples who refused to accept that their destruction was permanent and inevitable. Section V analyzes in detail how U.S. authorities weaponized the Ghost Dance through the manufactured "Indian Outbreak" narrative, media sensationalism about the "Messiah Craze," and military mobilization based on fabricated threats. Section VI examines the Wounded Knee massacre itself and how it was justified and covered up through depoliticization narratives.

Section VII analyzes the long-term consequences—how Wounded Knee was used to justify the Dawes Act and forced allotment, how the Ghost Dance suppression enabled final destruction of Lakota political autonomy, and how the weaponized narratives about Native superstition and

savagery persisted for generations. Section VIII concludes by connecting the Ghost Dance case to the broader framework about elite power and belief systems, revealing the universality of depoliticization mechanisms across different elite factions and contexts.

II. Foundation Conditions: Genocide, Broken Treaties, and the Creation of Desperation

The Ghost Dance movement of 1890 did not emerge from cultural characteristics or from inexplicable savage restlessness. It emerged from specific, concrete, material conditions that the U.S. government had deliberately created through systematic policies designed to destroy Native American autonomy, confiscate Native lands, eliminate Native subsistence economies, and force Native populations into dependence on government rations and oversight. Understanding these foundation conditions is essential because U.S. authorities systematically erased them from narratives about the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee, portraying Native spiritual responses to genocide as evidence of incapacity rather than as rational attempts to survive impossible circumstances.

The Broken Treaties and Progressive Land Confiscation

The Lakota Sioux and other Plains tribes had signed treaties with the U.S. government that supposedly guaranteed them permanent ownership of vast territories in the Great Plains in exchange for allowing American settlers and railroad construction through their lands. The most important was the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, which established the Great Sioux Reservation—all of present-day South Dakota west of the Missouri River—as permanent Lakota territory that the U.S. government promised would never be taken without consent of three-fourths of adult male Lakota.

The treaty was broken within a decade. When gold was discovered in the Black Hills—the sacred heart of Lakota territory and a region explicitly protected by the Fort Laramie Treaty—American prospectors flooded in illegally. The U.S. government, rather than enforcing the treaty and removing illegal settlers as it was obligated to do, instead attempted to purchase the Black Hills. When Lakota refused to sell their sacred lands, the U.S. government simply took them. The 1877 act that confiscated the Black Hills did not have consent of three-fourths of adult Lakota males as the treaty required—it was unilateral theft justified through narratives about savage Indians holding valuable resources that civilized men could develop.

The pattern continued through the 1880s. The Great Sioux Reservation was progressively carved up through additional acts that confiscated millions of acres. The 1889 agreement—negotiated through fraud, coercion, and promises that were immediately broken—reduced Lakota landholdings to six small reservations totaling approximately 12 million acres, down from the over 60 million acres promised in the Fort Laramie Treaty. Each land confiscation was justified through narratives about excess Indian land being wasted, about

civilization requiring that productive settlers develop resources rather than allowing nomadic savages to roam over them, and about protecting Indians themselves by concentrating them in smaller areas where they could be more easily supervised and civilized.

The progressive land theft destroyed the geographic basis for Lakota autonomy. The Great Sioux Reservation had been large enough that Lakota could maintain significant independence, could hunt buffalo on their own lands, and could avoid intensive surveillance and control by U.S. authorities. As the reservation was carved up, Lakota were concentrated into smaller areas surrounded by American settlers, making independence impossible and making populations dependent on government rations since the remaining reservation lands could not support traditional subsistence economies at the population densities now imposed.

The Extermination of the Buffalo and Destruction of Subsistence Economy

The most devastating blow to Lakota autonomy was the systematic extermination of the buffalo herds that had been the foundation of Plains Indian economies, cultures, and ways of life. In the 1860s, perhaps 30-60 million buffalo roamed the Great Plains. By 1890, fewer than 1,000 remained, saved from complete extinction only because a few ranchers and conservationists maintained small captive herds.

The extermination was deliberate policy, openly advocated by military commanders and government officials who recognized that destroying the buffalo would force Native peoples into dependence and make resistance impossible. General Philip Sheridan famously argued that buffalo hunters "have done more in the last two years, and will do more in the next year, to settle the vexed Indian question, than the entire regular army has done in the last forty years. They are destroying the Indians' commissary. Send them powder and lead... let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffalo is exterminated, as it is the only way to bring lasting peace and allow civilization to advance."

The extermination operated through multiple mechanisms. Commercial hunters slaughtered millions of buffalo for hides, leaving carcasses to rot on the plains since only the valuable hides were worth transporting to eastern markets. Railroads organized buffalo hunts as entertainment for passengers and as method for clearing lands adjacent to rail lines. Military forces deliberately destroyed buffalo herds encountered during campaigns against Native peoples. And government authorities encouraged the slaughter through policies that facilitated commercial hunting and through refusal to enforce treaty provisions that should have protected buffalo on Native lands.

The result was catastrophic for Plains tribes whose entire economies, cultures, and ways of life depended on buffalo. Buffalo provided food, clothing from hides, shelter materials for tipis, tools from bones and horns, trade goods, and the basis for seasonal migration patterns that had sustained Plains cultures for centuries. When the buffalo disappeared, these economies collapsed. Populations that had been self-sufficient through hunting, gathering, and trade were forced into complete dependence on government rations for survival.

The dependence was not accidental but was deliberate policy designed to force Native peoples onto reservations and to make them subject to government control. If they had maintained buffalo herds and could feed themselves through traditional means, they could have resisted confinement to reservations and could have maintained autonomy from U.S. oversight. Once buffalo were eliminated and starvation was the alternative to reservation life, resistance became materially impossible and populations had no choice but to accept whatever terms the government imposed.

The Reservation System as Concentration Camps

The reservation system established in the late nineteenth century functioned as concentration camps designed to isolate Native populations, prevent political organization, destroy traditional governance systems, eliminate cultural practices, and force dependency through control over food, resources, and movement. Reservations were typically established on the least valuable lands—areas unsuitable for agriculture, lacking in timber or minerals, isolated from economic development—ensuring that reservation populations would remain poor and dependent rather than developing economic independence that might enable political autonomy.

Reservation populations were subject to Indian Agents—government officials with near-dictatorial authority to regulate all aspects of life. Agents controlled the distribution of rations that populations depended on for survival. They enforced regulations prohibiting traditional religious practices, cultural ceremonies, and political gatherings. They could withhold rations as punishment for infractions or for refusal to comply with civilization programs. They worked with missionaries to force conversion to Christianity and to suppress traditional spiritual practices. And they collaborated with the military to arrest or remove individuals deemed troublesome or resistant.

The ratios provided on reservations were deliberately inadequate. Government appropriations for ration programs were consistently below levels needed to provide adequate nutrition, and corruption meant that what was appropriated often didn't reach reservation populations. Agents and contractors routinely stole from ration shipments, selling portions for personal profit or providing spoiled meat and moldy grain while keeping quality goods for sale elsewhere. Investigations repeatedly found that reservation populations were systematically underfed, but reforms were never sufficient and corruption continued.

The inadequate rations served policy purposes beyond mere budget cutting. Hunger made populations more compliant and dependent, more willing to accept civilization programs and cultural transformation if these were presented as paths to better rations or to economic opportunities. Hunger also weakened populations physically and psychologically, making resistance difficult and making populations vulnerable to disease epidemics that regularly swept reservations where malnutrition and overcrowding created perfect conditions for tuberculosis, pneumonia, influenza, and other illnesses.

Traditional governance systems were systematically destroyed on reservations. Chiefs who had led their people in negotiations with the U.S. government and who retained traditional authority

were bypassed or removed if they resisted civilization programs. Agents appointed "progressive" leaders willing to collaborate with assimilation policies and willing to undermine traditional authorities. These appointed leaders lacked traditional legitimacy but had access to resources and government support that gave them power. The result was fragmentation of political authority, destruction of consensus mechanisms that had governed tribal decision-making, and creation of factions that weakened collective resistance to government policies.

Children were removed from families and sent to boarding schools designed to destroy cultural transmission across generations. The boarding school system, exemplified by the Carlisle Indian Industrial School founded in 1879, operated under the explicit philosophy of "Kill the Indian, save the man." Children were forced to cut their hair, forbidden to speak Native languages, required to adopt American names and clothing, punished for any expression of traditional culture, and subjected to curricula designed to prepare them for subordinate positions in American society as manual laborers and domestic servants rather than as educated equals.

The cumulative effect of the reservation system was to create conditions of comprehensive dependency, cultural destruction, political fragmentation, economic devastation, and psychological despair. Populations that within living memory had been autonomous peoples controlling vast territories, sustaining themselves through sophisticated economic systems, organizing themselves through complex political structures, and maintaining rich cultural and spiritual traditions were reduced to starving dependents living in squalor on marginal lands, subject to dictatorial control by hostile bureaucrats, watching their children being taken away and their cultures being deliberately destroyed.

The Specific Crisis of 1889-1890: Deliberate Starvation

Against this background of systematic dispossession and oppression, 1889-1890 brought acute crisis through deliberate reduction of rations. Congress cut beef rations by 50% in 1889 based on budget concerns and based on claims that reservation populations were being fed too well and that reduced rations would force them to work harder to develop agricultural self-sufficiency. The cut was justified through narratives about lazy Indians dependent on government handouts who needed tough love to become self-reliant.

The reality was that reservation populations were already malnourished and that agricultural self-sufficiency was impossible on the marginal lands they had been confined to. The 1889 growing season on the Great Sioux Reservation had been devastated by drought, making crops fail. The remaining buffalo were gone. Traditional hunting and gathering was impossible both because game had been depleted and because reservation populations were prohibited from leaving reservation boundaries to hunt. The ration cuts meant literal starvation for populations with no alternatives.

Observers on the reservations reported desperate conditions. Agent reports described children with distended bellies from hunger, adults too weak to work, elderly dying from malnutrition and exposure, and increasing desperation as people recognized that the government was letting

them starve. Some reports were sympathetic and called for ration restoration; others blamed Indian laziness and resistance to civilization for the suffering. But even sympathetic reports emphasized that something had to give—either rations would be restored, or some disaster would result from the desperation the starvation created.

Into this context of systematic oppression, broken promises, cultural destruction, and acute starvation came the Ghost Dance movement offering hope that supernatural intervention would restore what Americans had destroyed: the ancestors would return, the buffalo would come back, the American invaders would disappear, and the world would be renewed as it had been before conquest. The movement emerged not from savage superstition but from the rational recognition that material resistance had failed, that Americans were deliberately destroying Native peoples, and that only supernatural intervention could possibly reverse circumstances that were otherwise terminal.

III. The Ghost Dance: Wovoka's Prophecy and the Spread of Desperate Hope

The Ghost Dance movement that swept through Western Native American communities in 1889-1890 combined appropriation of existing religious practices and spiritual beliefs with prophetic innovations that responded specifically to the crisis of conquest, dispossession, and cultural destruction. Understanding the movement requires examining both its theological content and its material functions—why people believed it, what needs it served, and how it provided psychological and spiritual survival for populations facing genocide.

Wovoka's Vision and the Original Prophecy

The Ghost Dance originated with Wovoka (also called Jack Wilson), a Paiute man living in Nevada who experienced visions during a solar eclipse in January 1889. Wovoka claimed that during the eclipse he had been taken to the spirit world where he met God and deceased ancestors who commissioned him to carry a message to Native peoples. The message promised that if people lived righteously, performed the Ghost Dance ceremony, and abandoned violence and alcohol, the world would be renewed: a new layer of earth would roll over the current world burying the Americans and all the devastation they had brought, the ancestors and recently deceased would return to life, the buffalo and other game would be restored in abundance, and Native peoples would live in peace and prosperity as they had before European arrival.

The theology combined elements from multiple traditions. Christianity influenced Wovoka's message through exposure to missionary teachings—the promise of a millennial transformation, resurrection of the dead, moral requirements for salvation, and the role of a prophet bringing divine revelation all echoed Christian themes. But the framework was fundamentally Native,

drawing on Paiute beliefs about the spirit world, about the continuity between living and deceased, and about the possibility of renewal through proper spiritual practice.

The Ghost Dance ceremony itself adapted the Round Dance, a traditional Paiute ceremony involving participants holding hands in a circle, dancing and singing while moving clockwise. The Ghost Dance modified the Round Dance by incorporating specific songs Wovoka had received in vision, by extending the dancing for days until participants achieved trance states where they could receive their own visions of the coming renewal, and by giving the ceremony explicit apocalyptic significance as the means through which the renewal would be achieved.

Critically, Wovoka's original message was explicitly pacifist and non-threatening to Americans. He taught that violence was prohibited, that participants should live peacefully with whites, that the renewal would come through spiritual transformation rather than through human military action, and that attempting to resist Americans through violence would prevent the renewal from occurring. The Ghost Dance as Wovoka originally formulated it was a spiritual movement of accommodation and hope rather than a movement of resistance or rebellion.

The Spread and Adaptation Among the Lakota

News of Wovoka's prophecy spread rapidly across Western tribes through networks of visiting delegations and through the communication systems that connected different reservation populations. Lakota delegations traveled to Nevada in 1889 and 1890 to meet Wovoka and to learn the Ghost Dance. They returned to the Dakota reservations convinced that the prophecy was true and eager to spread the message and the ceremony.

But as the Ghost Dance spread to the Lakota, the message was adapted to Lakota circumstances and to Lakota cultural frameworks. The adaptation involved both theological modifications and the introduction of material elements that would prove crucial for how American authorities weaponized the movement.

The theological modifications included greater emphasis on the removal of Americans and on the restoration of specific features of pre-conquest Lakota life. Where Wovoka's message had been relatively vague about how the renewal would occur and what exactly would be restored, Lakota Ghost Dance teachings specified that the new earth would bury Americans specifically, that the buffalo would return in vast herds, that the specific ancestors of Lakota families would be resurrected, and that traditional Lakota ways of life—hunting, following the buffalo, living in tipis, practicing traditional ceremonies—would be restored. The specificity reflected Lakota desperation about what they had lost and what they most desperately wanted returned.

More significantly, some Lakota leaders introduced the Ghost Shirt—a garment decorated with specific symbols (eagles, buffalo, morning stars, various protective designs) that was claimed to provide spiritual protection including invulnerability to bullets. The origin of the Ghost Shirt is contested, but the most influential advocates were Kicking Bear and Short Bull, Lakota leaders who had visited Wovoka and who returned preaching a more militant version of the Ghost Dance message.

The Ghost Shirt represented a significant theological departure from Wovoka's pacifist teachings. If the shirts made wearers bulletproof, then the implication was that conflict with Americans was anticipated or even planned. The shirts would only be necessary if military confrontation was expected. This introduced ambiguity about whether the Ghost Dance remained a purely spiritual movement of accommodation or whether it had become a movement preparing for armed resistance.

The ambiguity created dangers that Wovoka's original pacifism had avoided. A purely spiritual movement posing no military threat should not provoke violent American response—people dancing and praying for spiritual renewal were not an excuse for military intervention. But a movement preparing for armed resistance, even if the preparation involved only spiritual protection rather than actual weapons procurement, could be portrayed as imminent rebellion justifying preemptive military action.

The reality was that most Ghost Dance participants remained committed to the original pacifist message. They were dancing because they were desperate and because spiritual renewal was the only hope they had left. They were not preparing for war but for survival through supernatural intervention. But the presence of Ghost Shirts and the more militant rhetoric from some leaders provided American authorities with material they could weaponize to portray the entire movement as dangerous fanaticism threatening imminent violence.

The Functions of the Ghost Dance: Why People Believed

Understanding why the Ghost Dance spread so rapidly and why people committed to it so intensely requires examining the functions it served for populations in desperate circumstances. The movement was not merely delusion or manipulation but was a rational response to impossible circumstances, providing hope, meaning, cultural continuity, political unity, and psychological survival when material options had been exhausted.

First, the Ghost Dance provided hope when material circumstances offered none. The Lakota in 1890 faced comprehensive destruction: their lands confiscated, their buffalo exterminated, their children taken away, their traditional practices prohibited, their political autonomy eliminated, and their immediate circumstances involving literal starvation. The U.S. government had demonstrated repeatedly that it would not honor treaties, would not provide adequate support, and would continue pursuing policies designed to destroy Native cultures and force assimilation. Material resistance had been crushed—the military defeats of the 1870s and 1880s had demonstrated that armed resistance to American military power was suicidal. No material path to improvement existed.

The Ghost Dance offered a different kind of hope—supernatural intervention that would reverse what seemed irreversible. If God and the ancestors would renew the world, then the devastation was not permanent. If the prophecy was true, then Lakota ways of life could continue, children could be raised in traditional cultures, and the destruction could be undone. The hope was not irrational given that material hope had been eliminated—it was the only kind of hope that circumstances allowed.

Second, the Ghost Dance provided meaning and dignity. The reservation system and assimilation policies operated partly through psychological destruction, convincing Native peoples that their cultures were inferior, their traditional ways were backward, and their only path to survival was to abandon everything that made them who they were and to become poor imitations of Americans. This messaging was constant: from agents, from missionaries, from boarding schools, from government policies that prohibited traditional ceremonies and required adoption of American ways.

The Ghost Dance reversed this messaging. It proclaimed that traditional ways were not inferior but were what God intended, that ancestors were not shameful primitives but were honored spirits who would return, that the renewal would restore traditional life rather than forcing assimilation to American culture. Participating in the Ghost Dance was an assertion of dignity and worth against constant messaging that Native peoples were worthless and that their cultures deserved destruction.

Third, the Ghost Dance provided cultural continuity and resistance to forced cultural destruction. The ceremony itself—dancing in circles, singing traditional songs, experiencing visions, connecting with ancestors and the spirit world—was an assertion of cultural practice against policies designed to eliminate such practices. Agents prohibited the Ghost Dance specifically because they recognized it as resistance to assimilation. By dancing despite prohibitions, participants were maintaining cultural identity and transmitting traditional practices to younger generations who were being forcibly assimilated in boarding schools.

The Ghost Dance also created contexts where traditional knowledge could be shared, where elders could teach younger people about pre-conquest ways of life, and where communities could maintain social bonds that the reservation system was designed to fragment. The communal nature of the ceremony—requiring coordination across families and communities, involving collective rather than individual spiritual practice—reinforced social structures that assimilation policies tried to destroy.

Fourth, the Ghost Dance provided political unity across divisions that American policy exploited. The reservation system fragmented Lakota political organization by creating separate reservations, by appointing "progressive" leaders to undermine traditional authorities, and by creating competition for limited resources that set communities against each other. The Ghost Dance united participants across these divisions under shared spiritual purpose. Ghost Dancers from different reservations recognized each other as part of a movement that transcended the fragmentations American policy imposed.

This unity was threatening precisely because it recreated collective identity and collective purpose that had been systematically destroyed. A fragmented population was easy to control through manipulation of factions and through exploitation of divisions. A unified population committed to shared purpose and willing to resist assimilation collectively was much more difficult to control and represented a challenge to the effective functioning of reservation administration.

Fifth, the Ghost Dance provided agency and action. The despair of reservation life included powerlessness—the sense that nothing people did mattered, that they were completely subject to American decisions, and that their own actions could not improve circumstances. The Ghost Dance made renewal conditional on human action: people had to dance, had to live righteously, had to perform the ceremony correctly. This gave participants something to do, a way to participate in their own salvation rather than passively waiting for Americans to decide their fates.

The sense of agency was psychological necessity for survival. Populations experiencing genocide need to believe that resistance is possible, that their actions matter, that they have not been completely defeated. The Ghost Dance provided this even when material resistance was impossible. Dancing was doing something rather than accepting destruction passively.

The Rationality of Belief in Supernatural Intervention

From external perspectives, believing that dancing could make ancestors return and buffalo reappear seems irrational. But rationality must be assessed relative to circumstances and available options. For Lakota in 1890, what were the rational alternatives to the Ghost Dance?

They could accept that their destruction was permanent and inevitable, that their cultures would be eliminated, that their children would be forcibly assimilated, that their ways of life were finished. This acceptance meant psychological death even if physical survival continued—it meant embracing the American narrative that they were inferior and that their cultures deserved destruction.

They could attempt armed resistance despite knowing from bitter experience that military resistance to American forces was suicidal. The wars of the 1870s and 1880s had demonstrated that American military technology and organizational capacity were overwhelming. Attempting armed resistance would lead to massacres of combatants and civilians, would justify even harsher suppression, and would accomplish nothing except providing Americans with excuses for further violence.

Or they could embrace a spiritual movement that offered hope of renewal, that provided cultural continuity and dignity, that created collective purpose and unity, that gave them actions to take rather than passive acceptance of destruction. Even if the supernatural promises ultimately proved false, the Ghost Dance served crucial psychological and cultural functions that made survival possible. It allowed people to maintain hope, identity, community, and agency when material circumstances had eliminated all other sources of these psychological necessities.

The belief in the Ghost Dance was rational not because the supernatural claims were true—they were not, as the failure of the prophecy demonstrated—but because the alternative was the complete psychological and cultural death that would have preceded or accompanied physical death from starvation and violence. Given impossible circumstances, grasping at supernatural hope was more rational than accepting defeat or pursuing certain suicide through hopeless military resistance.

This rationality is exactly what American authorities erased when they weaponized the Ghost Dance. By portraying participants as superstitious savages believing impossible things, authorities obscured that people were making rational choices given impossible circumstances that American policies had deliberately created. The depoliticization transformed rational responses to genocide into evidence of incapacity requiring the very genocide that had produced the response.

IV. What the Ghost Dance Actually Threatened: Cultural Survival and Psychological Resistance

American authorities portrayed the Ghost Dance as an imminent military threat requiring urgent military intervention. But examining what the movement actually threatened reveals that the danger was not military uprising but rather cultural and psychological resistance to the assimilation policies that were designed to eliminate Native identity and autonomy. Understanding this reveals the depoliticization mechanism in operation: erasing the actual threat (resistance to cultural genocide) and replacing it with a fabricated threat (military rebellion) that justified the violent suppression that served American policy goals.

The Myth of Military Threat

American authorities, particularly Reservation Agents and military commanders, portrayed the Ghost Dance as preparation for armed rebellion. The narrative claimed that Ghost Dancers were working themselves into fanatical states that would lead to violence, that the movement was being orchestrated by hostile chiefs planning to attack Americans, and that the Ghost Shirts demonstrated clear intention to engage in combat since they would only be useful in battle contexts.

But the evidence for actual military threat was nonexistent. Ghost Dancers were not acquiring weapons beyond what they already possessed for hunting. They were not conducting military drills or formations. They were not attacking settlers, raiding supply trains, or engaging in any of the behaviors that would indicate preparation for warfare. The Ghost Dance ceremonies involved dancing, singing, praying, and experiencing visions—religious activities that posed no military danger whatsoever.

The Ghost Shirts, while concerning to authorities because they implied anticipated conflict, did not constitute preparation for military action. No evidence suggested that Ghost Dancers were planning attacks or that they believed the shirts authorized aggression. The more plausible interpretation was that the shirts represented spiritual protection in a context where conflict with Americans was always possible and where spiritual preparation was rational even for those committed to peace.

Moreover, the demographics and material circumstances of reservation populations made military uprising materially impossible. The Lakota on the reservations in 1890 were starving, sick, poorly armed, outnumbered, and surrounded by American military forces and settler populations. Any military action would have been suicidal and would have accomplished nothing except providing justification for massacres. Lakota leaders who had fought Americans in the 1870s knew this—they had experienced American military power and knew that the technological and numerical asymmetries made armed resistance hopeless.

The few Lakota leaders who expressed any militant rhetoric were not preparing actual military campaigns but were expressing frustration and desperation. When Sitting Bull was accused of fomenting rebellion, the evidence was that he permitted Ghost Dancing on his reservation and that he expressed skepticism about American promises—hardly evidence of planning military action. The authorities were manufacturing threats from religious practice and from entirely justified distrust of a government that had broken every promise it ever made to Native peoples.

The Actual Threat: Cultural and Psychological Resistance to Assimilation

The real threat the Ghost Dance posed was to the assimilation policies that American authorities had been implementing for decades and that they intended to accelerate through the Dawes Act and allotment programs. The assimilation project required that Native peoples internalize narratives about their own inferiority, accept that their traditional ways were backward and needed elimination, and embrace transformation into imitation Americans working as agricultural laborers or manual workers at the bottom of American society.

The Ghost Dance rejected all of this. It proclaimed that traditional ways were not inferior but were blessed by God and would be restored. It created contexts where traditional practices could continue despite prohibitions. It unified populations around resistance to cultural destruction. And it provided hope that assimilation was not inevitable, that another future was possible where Native cultures would not just survive but would be renewed and would flourish.

This cultural and psychological resistance threatened the assimilation project fundamentally. If populations believed their cultures were worth preserving and that they had alternatives to accepting American dictates, then assimilation policies would fail. The policies required psychological submission and cultural despair—populations needed to believe that resistance was hopeless and that their only option was to become what Americans demanded. The Ghost Dance challenged this by providing hope, unity, and continuing cultural identity despite all the material pressures toward submission and despair.

The threat was particularly acute because the Dawes Act of 1887 was being implemented precisely during the Ghost Dance period. The Dawes Act authorized breaking up tribal landholdings into individual allotments, with "surplus" lands being opened to American settlement. The policy was designed to destroy communal land ownership, force Native peoples into individualized capitalist agriculture, and eliminate the geographic basis for tribal identity and political organization. The policy required that Native peoples accept individual ownership rather

than communal identity, that they embrace the American economic system rather than traditional economies, and that they abandon tribal affiliation in favor of individual advancement.

The Ghost Dance represented resistance to all of this. It reinforced communal identity through collective ceremony. It celebrated traditional ways rather than accepting that American ways were superior. It maintained hope that restoration of traditional landholding and ways of life was possible rather than accepting that individualized allotments and capitalist agriculture were inevitable. And it created solidarity across reservations that could potentially organize resistance to allotment implementation.

The Threat to Agent Authority and Reservation Control

The Ghost Dance also threatened the authority of Reservation Agents and the control mechanisms through which they managed reservation populations. Agents maintained control partly through manipulation of rations and resources—rewarding compliance and punishing resistance—and partly through manipulation of divisions among Native populations. The Ghost Dance undermined both mechanisms.

By creating unity around shared spiritual purpose, the Ghost Dance made populations less amenable to manipulation through factional divisions. Agents typically controlled reservations by supporting "progressive" leaders willing to collaborate with assimilation policies while undermining "traditionalist" leaders who resisted. The Ghost Dance created a unifying movement that transcended this division and that brought together participants regardless of their previous factional affiliations.

Moreover, the Ghost Dance challenged agent authority directly by continuing despite prohibitions. When agents ordered Ghost Dancing stopped and participants continued anyway, this was open defiance of agent directives. The defiance was not violent—it was simply continuing religious practice despite orders to stop—but it demonstrated that agent authority was not absolute and that populations would resist orders they considered illegitimate.

For agents whose careers and authority depended on maintaining control and on successfully implementing assimilation policies, this defiance was intolerable. If populations could ignore directives about religious practice, what else might they resist? If the Ghost Dance could unite populations against agent authority, what would prevent organization of resistance to allotment, to ration cuts, to removal of children to boarding schools, or to other unpopular policies?

The threat was amplified because some prominent leaders participated in or tolerated the Ghost Dance. Sitting Bull, though skeptical of the prophecy, allowed Ghost Dancing on his reservation and refused to prohibit it when agents demanded. His tolerance was portrayed as hostile resistance and as evidence that he was using the movement to maintain his own influence against progressive leaders the agents supported. The fact that Sitting Bull maintained influence despite agent attempts to marginalize him was itself threatening, and his association with the Ghost Dance provided agents with justification for demanding his removal.

The Threat of Psychological Survival Against Genocidal Despair

Perhaps the deepest threat the Ghost Dance posed was that it enabled psychological and spiritual survival when American policy assumed and required that Native peoples would despair, accept their subordination, and internalize narratives of their own inferiority. The assimilation project required psychological destruction—populations needed to abandon belief in the value of their cultures, needed to accept that traditional ways had no future, needed to embrace transformation into subordinate positions within American society as their only option.

The Ghost Dance provided psychological survival against this. It maintained hope when circumstances were designed to eliminate hope. It affirmed cultural value when all messaging emphasized cultural worthlessness. It created meaning and purpose when policies were designed to create despair. And it unified people around resistance to psychological destruction when fragmentation and individual submission were policy goals.

This psychological resistance was threatening because it suggested that comprehensive material control was insufficient—that populations could maintain spiritual independence even when material circumstances gave them no options. American authorities needed not just physical control of reservation populations but psychological submission. The Ghost Dance demonstrated that psychological submission could not be assumed and that populations would resist cultural genocide even when they had no material means to resist physical control.

Understanding what the Ghost Dance actually threatened reveals the dishonesty of American narratives about military danger. Authorities were not responding to genuine military threats—they were responding to cultural and psychological resistance to policies designed to eliminate Native identities. The weaponization of the Ghost Dance involved fabricating military threats that did not exist in order to justify violent suppression of spiritual resistance that posed no danger except to the assimilation project's requirement of psychological submission and cultural despair.

V. Manufacturing the "Indian Outbreak": How Authorities Weaponized the Ghost Dance

The transformation of the Ghost Dance from a spiritual movement of desperate hope into evidence of savage fanaticism and imminent rebellion required systematic narrative construction by Reservation Agents, military commanders, media outlets, and government officials. This section examines how the "Indian Outbreak" was manufactured through deliberate misrepresentation, sensationalist media coverage, and coordination among authorities who recognized that portraying the Ghost Dance as dangerous served multiple policy objectives even when they knew the actual military threat was nonexistent.

Agent Panic and Deliberate Misrepresentation

The weaponization of the Ghost Dance began with Reservation Agents who reported to the Bureau of Indian Affairs that the movement represented imminent rebellion requiring military intervention. These reports were not neutral assessments of actual threats but were deliberate constructions designed to justify military support for agent authority and to shift blame for reservation problems from failed policies to hostile Indians.

Agent Daniel Royer at Pine Ridge Reservation was the most influential in constructing the outbreak narrative. Appointed in October 1890 despite no experience with Native Americans, Royer panicked when he encountered Ghost Dancing and immediately began sending alarmist reports to Washington claiming that thousands of hostile Indians were preparing for war. His reports described Ghost Dancers as "crazy" and "worked up to the highest pitch of excitement," claimed they were beyond agent control, and demanded immediate military intervention to prevent massacre of agency personnel and friendly Indians.

Royer's reports were factually false. Investigations after Wounded Knee would reveal that Ghost Dancing at Pine Ridge had been peaceful, that no preparations for military action had occurred, and that Royer's panic resulted from his own inexperience and from political pressures rather than from actual assessment of danger. But his reports had their intended effect: military forces were dispatched to the reservations, transforming a religious movement into what appeared to be a military crisis requiring military solution.

Other agents joined the alarm, though some did so more reluctantly and with more nuance. Agents recognized that portraying the Ghost Dance as dangerous served their interests even if they knew better. If the movement was characterized as religious practice that posed no threat, then agents would be responsible for managing it through negotiation and for explaining why they couldn't prevent populations from engaging in activities they had every right to pursue. But if the movement was characterized as hostile conspiracy, then agents could claim they needed military backup, could blame hostile Indians for reservation problems, and could shift responsibility for failures of assimilation policies from themselves to recalcitrant savages who refused civilization.

The narrative construction involved systematic erasure of context. Agent reports did not mention that Congress had cut rations by 50%, creating starvation conditions. They did not mention that the Dawes Act implementation was confiscating lands and destroying communal ownership. They did not mention that assimilation policies were deliberately destroying Native cultures and identities. They did not mention that every treaty had been broken and that populations had every reason to distrust government promises. Instead, reports portrayed Ghost Dancing as emerging from inexplicable savage hostility or from manipulation by bad chiefs who wanted to maintain power against progressive forces.

Media Sensationalism and the "Messiah Craze"

The media, particularly newspapers serving Eastern audiences hungry for exciting frontier stories, amplified agent reports into sensationalist coverage that portrayed the Ghost Dance as the "Messiah Craze"—a dangerous religious fanaticism sweeping through savage populations

who believed impossible supernatural claims and who were working themselves into frenzies that would inevitably lead to violence.

Headlines shrieked about "Indian Outbreak," "Hostile Lakota," "Ghost Dance Frenzy," and "Massacre Threatened." Stories described Ghost Dancers as savage fanatics dancing themselves into violent frenzies, as credulous primitives believing absurd prophecies, and as dangerous populations requiring military control. The coverage emphasized the supernatural elements—ancestors returning, Ghost Shirts stopping bullets—while completely ignoring the material conditions that had produced the movement or the explicitly pacifist teachings that characterized Wovoka's original message.

The media coverage served multiple functions for American audiences. It provided entertainment—exciting stories about dangerous frontier conditions and about savage Indians who were alien and threatening. It reinforced existing prejudices about Native inferiority and about the necessity of forcible civilization. It created public support for military intervention that might otherwise have seemed excessive response to religious dancing. And it shaped national narratives about the West as place where civilization struggled against savagery, justifying the policies that were eliminating Native autonomy and confiscating Native lands.

The coverage was also racialized in ways that revealed its propaganda functions. Christian religious movements involving faith healing, prophecy, emotional worship, and supernatural beliefs were common in American society and were covered respectfully or at least neutrally. But when Native Americans engaged in prophetic religion involving supernatural beliefs, this became the "Messiah Craze"—evidence of primitive superstition rather than legitimate spiritual practice. The double standard revealed that the issue was not supernatural belief per se but was the political function of portraying Native religion as irrational fanaticism requiring suppression.

Some journalists recognized the sensationalism and questioned the outbreak narrative. Reporters who visited the reservations and observed Ghost Dancing firsthand sometimes reported that it appeared to be peaceful religious ceremony rather than preparation for war. But these more accurate accounts were buried by sensationalist coverage that served audience appetites for exciting frontier stories and that served political purposes by generating support for military intervention.

Military Mobilization and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

The Bureau of Indian Affairs requested military intervention based on agent reports, and the War Department responded by deploying thousands of troops to the Lakota reservations. By late November 1890, approximately 3,000 soldiers with artillery were surrounding the reservations—the largest military mobilization against Native Americans since the end of the major Indian Wars of the 1870s.

The military presence transformed the situation from religious movement into military confrontation through self-fulfilling prophecy. The deployment signaled to reservation

populations that Americans viewed Ghost Dancing as hostile act requiring military response. Some Lakota, frightened by the military presence, fled to remote areas of the reservations or to the Badlands where they could continue Ghost Dancing away from immediate military supervision. The flight was portrayed as hostile movement confirming the outbreak narrative—if they were not hostile, why would they flee from military protection?

But the logic was perverse. Populations fled because military presence threatened them, not because they were planning rebellion. They knew from bitter experience that military forces meant violence, that confrontations with soldiers ended with Native casualties, and that the safest response to military deployment was to avoid contact. The flight was defensive rather than aggressive, but it was characterized as evidence confirming that military intervention had been necessary to prevent the outbreak the intervention itself had created.

Some military commanders recognized this dynamic and tried to manage it carefully. General Nelson Miles, overall commander of forces in the region, understood that Ghost Dancing itself was not military threat and that heavy-handed military intervention could provoke the very violence that agents claimed to fear. Miles attempted to surround the reservations without directly engaging Ghost Dancers, hoping that the movement would dissipate naturally once participants recognized that the prophecy would not be fulfilled.

But other commanders and many subordinate officers were less careful. They viewed the deployment as opportunity to discipline Indians who had been allowed to become too independent, to remind them of American power, and to crush any resistance to authority. Some officers wanted confrontation and looked for excuses to engage Native forces. The military culture emphasized decisive action and viewed patience as weakness, creating pressures for aggressive rather than cautious responses to any perceived Native resistance.

The Murder of Sitting Bull: Eliminating Symbolic Leadership

The weaponization of the Ghost Dance reached its first lethal culmination with the killing of Sitting Bull on December 15, 1890. Sitting Bull had not actively promoted the Ghost Dance and was skeptical of the prophecy, but he tolerated Ghost Dancing on his reservation and refused agent demands to prohibit it. This tolerance was characterized as hostile resistance and as evidence that Sitting Bull was using the movement to maintain his influence and to undermine progressive leaders.

Agent James McLaughlin at Standing Rock Reservation had long sought to eliminate Sitting Bull's influence, viewing him as obstacle to assimilation policies and as representative of the old ways that needed to be destroyed. The Ghost Dance provided McLaughlin with justification for moving against Sitting Bull, claiming that his tolerance of the movement and his continued influence over traditional Lakota made him dangerous figure who needed to be arrested before he could lead a rebellion.

The arrest attempt was deliberately designed for confrontation rather than peaceful resolution. Rather than having Sitting Bull simply report to the agency or arranging for his gradual isolation

from his followers, McLaughlin ordered Indian Police—Lakota who worked for the agency—to arrest Sitting Bull at his cabin before dawn on December 15. The plan assumed that early morning arrest would prevent Sitting Bull's followers from interfering, but it also ensured that followers would be awakened by the commotion and would attempt to prevent what they recognized as kidnapping of their leader.

The confrontation unfolded as could have been predicted. Sitting Bull initially agreed to go with the police, but his followers gathered and attempted to prevent his removal. In the ensuing struggle, one of Sitting Bull's followers shot one of the Indian Police, who in turn shot Sitting Bull. Additional shooting killed several of Sitting Bull's followers and several police. Sitting Bull's death was presented as confirmation that he had been planning resistance—if he and his followers were peaceful, why would they have resisted arrest?

But the reality was that the arrest operation was designed to provoke exactly the confrontation that occurred. Sitting Bull was killed not because he was planning rebellion but because his continuing influence and his tolerance of the Ghost Dance threatened agent authority and assimilation policies. His murder was weaponization of the Ghost Dance narrative to eliminate a symbolic leader who represented resistance to cultural destruction, and the confrontation was used to justify claims that Ghost Dancers were dangerous hostiles requiring military suppression.

Creating the Conditions for Wounded Knee

Sitting Bull's killing terrified Lakota on all the reservations. If the most prominent leader could be killed in his own cabin by Indian Police operating on agent orders, then no one was safe. Populations that had been cautiously continuing Ghost Dancing despite military presence now recognized that the situation was turning deadly and that Americans were prepared to kill anyone associated with the movement regardless of whether they posed any actual military threat.

Big Foot's band at Cheyenne River Reservation was particularly frightened. Big Foot was a Minneconjou leader who had participated in Ghost Dancing and who was on a list that Reservation Agents had compiled of "dangerous" leaders who might need to be arrested. When news of Sitting Bull's death reached Big Foot's band, they decided to flee to Pine Ridge Reservation where they hoped Red Cloud, a respected leader who maintained better relations with Americans, might be able to protect them.

The flight was characterized by military forces as hostile movement confirming that Big Foot was leading a band of dangerous Ghost Dancers who were attempting to join other hostiles at Pine Ridge to launch the long-feared outbreak. In reality, Big Foot's band was fleeing for their lives, seeking protection from what they correctly recognized as imminent danger from military forces who might treat them as Sitting Bull had been treated.

Military commanders ordered Big Foot's capture, and on December 28, 1890, the 7th Cavalry under Major Samuel Whitside intercepted the band near Wounded Knee Creek. Big Foot, sick

with pneumonia and unable to ride, was transported in a wagon. The band was escorted to a camp near Wounded Knee Creek where they were surrounded by approximately 500 soldiers with four Hotchkiss guns—rapid-fire artillery pieces—positioned on hills overlooking the camp. The cavalry was ordered to disarm the band the next morning and to remove them to a military post.

The stage was set for massacre. A band of approximately 350 Lakota—including about 230 women and children—were surrounded by heavily armed military forces, were being ordered to surrender all weapons, were terrified from Sitting Bull's recent killing, and were in defensive postures because they recognized they were in mortal danger. Military forces viewed them as dangerous Ghost Dancers who might be planning resistance and who needed to be disarmed and controlled. The commanders wanted to eliminate any capability for resistance, wanted to make an example that would deter future Ghost Dancing, and were under orders to crush the movement decisively.

The narrative that would be used to justify what happened next was already established: these were savage fanatics who believed impossible things, who wore Ghost Shirts thinking they were bulletproof, who had been preparing for rebellion, and who had forced military intervention through their refusal to accept civilization peacefully. When violence erupted, it would be portrayed not as American massacre of defenseless civilians but as tragic but necessary battle against treacherous savages whose own fanaticism had led them to reckless resistance.

VI. Wounded Knee: Massacre, Cover-Up, and the Triumph of Depoliticization

The events of December 29, 1890, at Wounded Knee Creek resulted in approximately 300 Lakota deaths—men, women, children, elderly—cut down by rifle fire and Hotchkiss artillery in a massacre that American authorities immediately began to reframe as battle against hostile savages. The massacre and its subsequent justification demonstrate the depoliticization mechanism in its most brutal form: transforming American violence against defenseless populations into evidence confirming the very narratives that had been used to justify the violence, creating a closed narrative loop where victims became perpetrators and perpetrators became reluctant defenders against savage fanaticism.

The Massacre Itself: What Actually Happened

On the morning of December 29, Colonel James Forsyth ordered Big Foot's band to assemble for disarmament. The men were separated from women and children and were ordered to surrender all weapons. The initial collection yielded about 40 firearms, which Forsyth considered insufficient—he believed the band was hiding weapons and ordered a more thorough search including inspection of personal belongings and tipis.

The exact sequence of events that triggered the violence is contested, but most accounts agree that as soldiers were searching the camp and tensions were rising, a shot was fired. Most evidence suggests the shot came from a deaf Lakota man named Black Coyote who did not hear orders to surrender his rifle and who struggled when soldiers attempted to take it from him. The rifle discharged during the struggle.

The soldiers immediately opened fire on the assembled Lakota men at point-blank range. Lakota who had weapons that they had concealed or who grabbed weapons during the initial volley returned fire, killing some soldiers. But within minutes the initial exchange was over, with most Lakota men dead or dying. The Hotchkiss guns on the hills then opened fire, raking the camp with explosive shells that killed indiscriminately. Women and children fleeing the camp were pursued and shot. Some were killed at distances of two to three miles from the initial site, hunted down as they ran across the prairie.

The killing continued for perhaps an hour. When it ended, approximately 300 Lakota were dead or mortally wounded, including approximately 200 women and children. Many bodies showed evidence of being shot at close range or of being killed while fleeing. Infants were found dead still clutched in their mothers' arms. Elderly who could not flee were shot where they sat. The dead were left on the field initially, and a blizzard that night covered many bodies with snow. The frozen corpses would not be buried until several days later, thrown into a mass grave.

Military casualties were approximately 25 killed and 39 wounded. Most military casualties resulted from friendly fire during the chaotic initial exchange when soldiers on multiple sides of the camp fired toward each other. Some resulted from the few Lakota who managed to return fire before being killed. The casualty ratio—300 Lakota dead versus 25 soldiers killed—reveals that this was not battle between combatants but was massacre of a primarily civilian population.

Immediate Justification: The "Battle" Narrative

Military authorities immediately characterized Wounded Knee as battle rather than as massacre. Official reports claimed that Big Foot's band had treacherously opened fire on soldiers attempting peaceful disarmament, that the Ghost Shirts had encouraged Lakota to believe they were invulnerable and therefore to fight recklessly, and that soldiers had responded defensively to hostile attack with necessary force to protect themselves.

The narrative required ignoring several obvious problems. First, if Lakota had planned to attack, they would not have surrendered peacefully and allowed themselves to be surrounded and disarmed. The fact that they complied with orders to assemble and that they surrendered dozens of weapons before the shooting started contradicts claims of planned treacherous attack. Second, the massive disparity in casualties and the evidence that women and children fleeing the camp were pursued and killed demonstrates that this was not defensive response but was offensive massacre. Third, the friendly fire casualties among soldiers indicate chaos and indiscipline rather than controlled defensive response to attack.

But the battle narrative served crucial functions regardless of its factual accuracy. It absolved military forces of responsibility for killing civilians. It portrayed Lakota as treacherous savages who had attacked despite being treated well. It confirmed the narrative that Ghost Dancers were dangerous fanatics whose fanaticism had led them to suicidal resistance. And it justified the entire military intervention as having been necessary to prevent the outbreak that Wounded Knee supposedly proved had been imminent.

The Ghost Shirts became central to the battle narrative. Reports emphasized that many Lakota men killed at Wounded Knee had been wearing Ghost Shirts, that they had believed the shirts would protect them from bullets, and that this belief had encouraged them to fight when they should have surrendered peacefully. The shirts were presented as evidence of fanaticism that had led to tragedy—if the men had not believed in impossible supernatural protection, they would not have resisted and would not have been killed.

But this interpretation ignored that Ghost Shirts were worn as spiritual protection in general, not specifically as protection for offensive military action. It ignored that Lakota resistance, to the extent it occurred, was defensive response to being fired upon rather than planned offensive action. It ignored that the supernatural beliefs were not causes of resistance but were desperate hopes of populations facing genocide. And it ignored that even without Ghost Shirts, the massacre would have occurred—the military forces surrounded the camp, had overwhelming firepower advantage, and were determined to crush the Ghost Dance movement decisively.

Congressional Investigation and Political Cover-Up

Public pressure from reform groups concerned about the massive civilian casualties led to Congressional investigation. The investigation heard testimony from military officers, from soldiers who participated in the killing, from a few Lakota survivors, and from other witnesses. The investigation had the opportunity to expose the massacre for what it was and to hold responsible those who had transformed religious dancing into pretense for military violence.

Instead, the investigation largely confirmed the official narrative. The final report characterized Wounded Knee as unfortunate result of Lakota treachery, emphasized that soldiers had acted in self-defense, and exonerated military leadership of responsibility for civilian deaths. Some members of the investigative committee expressed concerns about civilian casualties and questioned whether the Hotchkiss guns should have been used against the fleeing camp, but these concerns did not lead to findings of wrongdoing or to recommendations for accountability.

The investigation served to legitimate the massacre through official sanction. Critics who characterized Wounded Knee as war crime could be dismissed as failing to understand the realities that the investigation had carefully examined. The investigation's exoneration of military leadership became part of the official record, making it difficult for later accounts to challenge the battle narrative without appearing to question Congressional authority and official findings.

Moreover, the investigation reinforced the depoliticization by focusing on tactical details of the killing—whether specific orders were appropriate, whether particular actions by individual

soldiers were justified—while ignoring the broader context that military forces had been deployed based on fabricated threats, that the Ghost Dance had been weaponized to justify intervention against a spiritual movement, and that American policies of starvation and cultural destruction had created the desperate circumstances that produced the Ghost Dance.

Awards and Medals: Sanctifying the Massacre

In one of the most grotesque aspects of the Wounded Knee aftermath, military authorities awarded 20 Medals of Honor to soldiers who participated in the killing. The Medals of Honor were justified through narratives about heroic action under fire, about soldiers who had risked their lives defending their comrades against treacherous attack, and about exemplary courage in battle conditions.

The awards sanctified the massacre as heroic military action. They transformed killing of women and children into evidence of valor. They provided official recognition that what happened at Wounded Knee was not atrocity but was justified military operation where soldiers acted courageously and appropriately. The medals became permanent symbols that official America honored those who killed at Wounded Knee rather than condemning them or holding them accountable.

The awards also served to silence criticism. To characterize Wounded Knee as massacre meant implying that Medal of Honor recipients were war criminals rather than heroes. This made it extremely difficult politically to challenge the official narrative—doing so meant attacking men who had been honored as exemplars of American military valor. The medals created institutional and political barriers to acknowledging what had actually occurred.

Mass Grave and Erasure of Individual Victims

The approximately 300 Lakota killed at Wounded Knee were buried in a mass grave after lying frozen on the field for several days. The mass burial erased individual identities and individual deaths, transforming specific people—mothers shot while fleeing with infants, children killed while running, elderly executed while sitting in camp, men shot during chaotic confrontation—into an undifferentiated mass of hostile casualties whose individual stories and individual tragedies were made invisible.

The mass grave also prevented accounting and prevented families from knowing specific fates of their relatives. Some Lakota survived the massacre but were never reunited with family members who had been killed, making it impossible to know whether relatives were among the dead or had survived and fled elsewhere. The erasure of individual identities prevented the kind of detailed accounting that might have revealed the true nature of what happened and that might have made it harder to sustain the battle narrative.

Photographs of the mass grave were taken and distributed, becoming iconic images in American popular culture. But the photographs were typically captioned as showing burial of hostile Indians killed in battle rather than as showing evidence of massacre. The images

became part of the narrative apparatus that naturalized Wounded Knee as regrettable but understandable outcome of savage resistance to civilization rather than as American atrocity.

The Triumph of Depoliticization

The aftermath of Wounded Knee demonstrates depoliticization in its most complete form. What actually happened—military massacre of primarily civilian population surrounded and disarmed, with women and children hunted down and killed as they fled—was transformed through narrative into something else entirely: battle against treacherous savages whose fanatical beliefs had led them to reckless resistance that forced soldiers to defend themselves.

The transformation required erasing the material conditions that had produced the Ghost Dance: starvation from ration cuts, land confiscation through broken treaties, buffalo extermination, cultural destruction through assimilation policies, and comprehensive oppression through the reservation system. It required erasing that the Ghost Dance was explicitly pacifist spiritual movement rather than preparation for military action. It required erasing that Big Foot's band had been fleeing for protection rather than seeking confrontation. It required erasing that the military intervention had been based on fabricated threats rather than on actual danger.

What remained after this erasure was the official narrative: savage Indians had believed impossible supernatural claims including that Ghost Shirts would protect them from bullets, had become fanatical through their religious dancing, had treacherously attacked soldiers attempting peaceful disarmament, and had suffered tragic but inevitable consequences when their fanaticism led them to resist civilization. The narrative blamed victims for their own deaths, portrayed perpetrators as reluctant defenders, and transformed American violence into evidence confirming the very stereotypes about savage incapacity that had been used to justify the violence.

The depoliticization succeeded because it served multiple American interests simultaneously. It exonerated military forces and civilian authorities of responsibility for massacre. It provided justification for the military intervention that had been based on fabricated threats. It created narrative precedent for future suppressions of Native resistance. It reinforced stereotypes about Native inferiority and incapacity that justified assimilation policies. And it eliminated from public discourse any serious examination of the policies that had created the conditions producing the Ghost Dance.

VII. Long-Term Consequences: Weaponizing Wounded Knee for Assimilation and Cultural Genocide

The Wounded Knee massacre and the broader suppression of the Ghost Dance movement had consequences extending far beyond the immediate deaths and trauma. American authorities weaponized Wounded Knee to accelerate assimilation policies, to destroy remaining Native

political and cultural autonomy, to justify land confiscation through the Dawes Act, and to construct permanent narratives about Native incapacity that would marginalize Native peoples politically and economically for generations. Understanding these long-term consequences reveals how the depoliticization mechanism operated not just to justify immediate violence but to create conditions for permanent subjugation.

Accelerating the Dawes Act and Forced Allotment

The Dawes Act of 1887 had authorized breaking up tribal landholdings into individual allotments, with "surplus" lands being opened to American settlement. Implementation had been proceeding before Wounded Knee but faced resistance from Native populations who recognized that allotment would destroy communal landholding, would enable loss of most remaining tribal lands, and would force Native peoples into individualized capitalist agriculture for which they lacked resources and training.

Wounded Knee was used to overcome this resistance and to justify forcible implementation of allotment. The narrative claimed that the Ghost Dance had demonstrated that tribal organization and traditional ways led to fanaticism and violence, that communal landholding enabled hostile chiefs to maintain influence over their followers, and that only through breaking up tribal structures and forcing individual ownership could Native peoples be protected from their own tendencies toward savage resistance to civilization.

American authorities portrayed allotment as humanitarian protection of Native peoples from their own backwardness. Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas Jefferson Morgan argued after Wounded Knee that the tragedy demonstrated the urgency of destroying tribal systems and integrating Native peoples individually into American society where they would be protected by law and civilization rather than being subject to chiefs who could manipulate them into futile resistance. The language was explicitly paternalistic: Native peoples were like children who needed to be forcibly separated from bad influences and guided toward proper development even if they resisted what was for their own good.

The actual effect of allotment was devastating. Between 1887 and 1934, Native landholdings declined from approximately 138 million acres to approximately 48 million acres—a loss of 90 million acres through allotment and sale of "surplus" lands. Much of the remaining 48 million acres was desert or otherwise marginal land unsuitable for productive use. Individual allotments were typically too small to support families through agriculture, lacked access to water or to markets, and were subject to complex legal restrictions that made them difficult to use productively.

Moreover, allotment facilitated land loss through legal mechanisms Americans controlled. Individual Native landowners were subjected to state property taxes they could not pay, leading to tax foreclosures and sales. Allotments could be leased to American farmers with terms set by Bureau of Indian Affairs, with lease revenues often being misappropriated. And "surplus" lands were opened to American settlement, creating checkerboard patterns of ownership that

fragmented remaining tribal territories and made collective use of remaining lands virtually impossible.

The allotment policy was justified through narratives established through the Ghost Dance weaponization: Native peoples were incapable of managing communal property, their traditional systems led to poverty and enabled manipulation by chiefs, and individual ownership under American legal systems was necessary protection from their own cultural inadequacies. Wounded Knee became permanent reference point in these narratives—the tragedy that demonstrated what happened when tribal systems were allowed to persist rather than being forcibly transformed through assimilation.

Destroying Political Autonomy and Tribal Governance

The Ghost Dance suppression was used to justify destruction of remaining Native political autonomy and tribal governance structures. American authorities argued that the movement had demonstrated that traditional leadership was dangerous, that chiefs used their influence to resist civilization rather than to promote it, and that tribal political organization needed to be eliminated and replaced with structures Americans controlled.

The killing of Sitting Bull was portrayed as necessary elimination of a dangerous influence, setting precedent for removing other traditional leaders who resisted assimilation. Leaders who maintained authority through traditional mechanisms rather than through Bureau of Indian Affairs appointment were systematically marginalized. The practice of appointing "progressive" leaders willing to collaborate with assimilation policies was intensified, creating puppet governance structures that had no legitimacy among Native populations but that provided administrative cover for American policies.

Tribal councils, where they existed, were reorganized to eliminate traditional authorities and to ensure that members were individuals Americans considered reliable and progressive. Decision-making authority was increasingly concentrated in Reservation Agents and in Bureau of Indian Affairs officials who could overrule any tribal decisions Americans disagreed with. The political autonomy that Fort Laramie Treaty had supposedly guaranteed was eliminated in practice, with reservations functioning as administrative units Americans controlled rather than as territories where tribal governance had meaningful authority.

The destruction of political autonomy was justified through the same depoliticization narratives used for allotment. The Ghost Dance had supposedly demonstrated that Native political systems produced fanaticism and resistance. Sitting Bull had supposedly used his influence to support dangerous movements rather than to promote civilization. Traditional governance supposedly kept Native peoples in poverty and backwardness. Therefore, American control of governance was necessary protection and was humanitarian intervention to save Native peoples from systems that harmed them.

Intensifying Cultural Destruction Through Boarding Schools and Religious Suppression

The Ghost Dance suppression provided justification for intensifying policies designed to destroy Native cultural transmission. The boarding school system was expanded, with increased emphasis on removing children at younger ages, on preventing contact between children and families, and on complete cultural transformation. The Ghost Dance was cited as evidence that Native parents could not be trusted to raise children properly, that cultural transmission across generations produced dangerous fanaticism, and that only complete removal of children from Native cultural influence could produce successful assimilation.

Religious suppression was also intensified. The Ghost Dance was officially prohibited on all reservations, with severe punishments for anyone caught participating. Traditional religious practices more generally were prohibited or severely restricted under regulations that characterized them as obstacles to civilization. Sun Dances, traditional ceremonies, spiritual practices, and cultural gatherings were banned, with violations punished through imprisonment, withholding of rations, or removal from reservations.

The prohibition was justified through narratives about the dangers of Native religion demonstrated by the Ghost Dance. American authorities argued that Native spiritual practices led to fanaticism, that they reinforced backwardness and resistance to civilization, and that they had to be eliminated before Native peoples could be successfully transformed. The explicit goal was cultural genocide—destroying Native religions, languages, cultural practices, and identities and replacing them with American alternatives.

Christian missionaries were given increasing access and support to convert Native populations. The argument was that Christianity would provide proper spiritual foundation to replace dangerous Native religious practices. The fact that Christianity itself involved supernatural beliefs including resurrection, miracles, and divine intervention was not acknowledged as inconsistent with criticisms of Native supernatural beliefs—the issue was not supernatural belief per se but was the political function of characterizing Native beliefs as dangerous fanaticism while treating Christian beliefs as legitimate faith.

Constructing Permanent Narratives of Native Incapacity

The long-term consequence that most powerfully demonstrates the depoliticization mechanism was the construction of permanent narratives about Native incapacity that would justify political marginalization, economic exploitation, and denial of civil rights for generations. The Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee became reference points in American discourse establishing that Native peoples were fundamentally incapable of the rationality, judgment, and civilization required for self-governance or for equal participation in American society.

The narratives emphasized the supernatural elements of the Ghost Dance while erasing material context. Schoolchildren learned that "Indians" had believed impossible things like that Ghost Shirts would stop bullets, demonstrating their credulity and backwardness. Popular culture portrayed Ghost Dancers as superstitious savages who had brought tragedy upon themselves through fanatical resistance to civilization. The narratives naturalized the idea that

Native peoples were intellectually and culturally inferior, requiring permanent American guardianship.

These narratives justified exclusion of Native peoples from citizenship rights until the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act, and even after formal citizenship, justified excluding them from voting through state laws and administrative barriers. They justified the trust system where Native property was held in trust by the federal government because Native peoples supposedly could not manage property themselves. They justified Bureau of Indian Affairs control over Native affairs because Native peoples supposedly needed permanent oversight. And they justified economic policies that kept reservations impoverished by portraying poverty as result of Native cultural inadequacies rather than as result of systematic dispossession and exploitation.

The narratives also served to obscure American responsibility for genocide. If Native populations declined from disease, starvation, and violence, this could be attributed to their own failure to adapt and to their stubborn resistance to civilization rather than to American policies that had deliberately created the conditions for decline. If reservations were impoverished, this was evidence that Native peoples could not successfully participate in modern economies rather than evidence that American policies had confiscated the best lands and prevented economic development. The depoliticization transformed causes into effects and effects into causes, making American violence and exploitation invisible while making Native suffering appear to be natural consequence of cultural inadequacy.

The Persistence of Depoliticization Into the Present

The narratives constructed through the Ghost Dance weaponization persist into the present in various forms. Wounded Knee remains contested in American memory, with many Americans accepting some version of the battle narrative rather than recognizing it as massacre. The Ghost Dance is remembered in popular culture primarily through the supernatural elements—the impossible prophecy, the Ghost Shirts that failed to protect—rather than through understanding it as spiritual response to genocide. And stereotypes about Native peoples as superstitious, as locked in the past, as incapable of modernity, continue to shape policy debates and popular perceptions.

Contemporary policies toward Native peoples continue to reflect depoliticization patterns. Federal trust responsibility is portrayed as benevolent protection rather than as mechanism for control. Economic development on reservations is blocked by complex regulations ostensibly designed to protect Native interests but functionally preventing autonomy. And when Native communities resist policies that threaten their interests—whether pipeline construction, resource extraction, or land use decisions—the resistance is often portrayed through cultural or spiritual frames that obscure material grievances, similar to how the Ghost Dance was portrayed as fanatical spirituality rather than as rational response to exploitation.

The task of decolonization requires challenging these persistent narratives by recovering the material conditions that produced movements like the Ghost Dance, by exposing how American authorities weaponized supernatural elements while erasing political content, and by

recognizing that Wounded Knee was not tragic battle but was massacre that culminated systematic genocide. The depoliticization succeeded in constructing narratives that have shaped American consciousness for over a century, but those narratives can be challenged by centering Native experiences and by recovering the histories that depoliticization systematically erased.

VIII. Conclusion: The American Application of Colonial Depoliticization

The Ghost Dance movement and Wounded Knee massacre demonstrate that the depoliticization mechanism examined in the Xhosa cattle killing, Maji Maji rebellion, and Santhal rebellion was not unique to European colonial empires but operated identically in American conquest of Native peoples. The pattern was consistent across all four cases: systematic erasure of material grievances produced by conquest and exploitation, obsessive emphasis on supernatural elements of resistance movements, declaration that colonized populations were mentally and culturally incapable of civilization, and justification of violent suppression and intensified control as benevolent protection. Understanding this pattern reveals that depoliticization is not characteristic of particular national traditions but is systematic elite strategy deployed whenever politically expedient to transform challenges to extraction and domination into evidence of incapacity requiring the domination being challenged.

The Four-Step Mechanism in American Context

The depoliticization operated through the same four steps visible in the colonial cases. First, American authorities systematically erased the material conditions that had produced the Ghost Dance: the broken treaties and progressive land confiscations, the deliberate buffalo extermination that destroyed subsistence economies, the reservation system that functioned as concentration camps, the starvation from ration cuts, and the comprehensive cultural destruction through assimilation policies. These concrete grievances were removed from narratives and replaced with portrayals of inexplicable savage hostility or manipulation by bad chiefs resisting civilization.

Second, authorities obsessively emphasized the supernatural elements while ignoring the movement's explicitly pacifist character and its function as spiritual survival mechanism. The prophecy about ancestors returning and the Ghost Shirts became the entire story, transformed through media sensationalism into the "Messiah Craze"—evidence of dangerous primitive fanaticism. The emphasis made the movement appear ridiculous and irrational rather than appearing as desperate hope in response to impossible circumstances.

Third, based on the supernatural beliefs, American authorities declared Native peoples fundamentally incapable of rational judgment and civilization, requiring permanent oversight and forced transformation. The Ghost Dance became permanent evidence in American discourse

that Native peoples were superstitious savages who would believe impossible things and therefore could not be trusted with self-governance or with maintaining traditional ways in modern contexts.

Fourth, the violence of Wounded Knee and the intensified assimilation policies were justified as protecting Native peoples from themselves. The massacre was reframed from American atrocity into tragic but necessary response to savage fanaticism. The acceleration of allotment and cultural destruction was portrayed as humanitarian intervention saving Native peoples from tribal systems that produced poverty and enabled prophetic manipulation. American authorities positioned themselves as reluctant but benevolent guardians forced to destroy Native autonomy for Native peoples' own good.

Cross-Case Patterns: Universal Elite Mechanisms

Comparing the Ghost Dance case with the colonial cases reveals universal patterns about how elites weaponize the beliefs of resistance movements to justify violent suppression and expanded domination. In all four cases, movements emerged from rational responses to material exploitation and oppression. In all four cases, supernatural or prophetic elements provided hope, legitimacy, and unity when material resistance had been exhausted. In all four cases, authorities erased material context and emphasized supernatural elements to portray movements as irrational fanaticism. In all four cases, the supernatural beliefs became permanent evidence of colonized incapacity justifying permanent subordination.

The pattern demonstrates that elite depoliticization is not opportunistic exploitation of particular circumstances but is systematic strategy deployed consistently when confronting resistance from populations that have been conquered and dispossessed. The specific supernatural claims varied—ancestors returning versus magic water versus divine messages versus Ghost Shirts—but the function was identical across cases: providing hope and legitimacy for resistance when material options had been eliminated. And the elite weaponization was identical: using the supernatural claims to declare incapacity and to justify violence and intensified control.

The cross-case pattern also reveals the hypocrisy of civilizational narratives. Americans criticized European colonialism and positioned the United States as beacon of freedom and democracy, but American treatment of Native peoples deployed identical colonial methods. British authorities claimed to bring civilization to savage Africans while using Xhosa supernatural beliefs to justify land theft. German authorities claimed civilizing mission in Africa while using Maji Maji beliefs to justify genocide. American authorities claimed manifest destiny and continental advancement while using Ghost Dance beliefs to justify massacre and cultural destruction. The narratives varied but the mechanisms and outcomes were identical.

The Framework Application: Belief as Colonial Weapon

The analytical framework emphasizes that elite power depends on appropriating belief systems to legitimate extraction and that elites coordinate to suppress challenges to extraction systems.

The Ghost Dance case extends the framework by demonstrating how elites weaponize beliefs associated with resistance movements against those movements, creating permanent justifications for domination based on the very beliefs that emerged as responses to that domination.

The weaponization creates closed narrative loops where resistance becomes evidence justifying the oppression that produced the resistance. Native peoples resisted American conquest and cultural destruction through spiritual movement promising renewal. American authorities used the spiritual elements to declare Native incapacity. The declaration justified intensified cultural destruction and political subordination. Future resistance would be interpreted through the incapacity framework established by weaponizing the Ghost Dance. The loop was self-reinforcing: resistance proved incapacity, incapacity justified domination, domination produced resistance, resistance proved incapacity.

Breaking these closed loops requires recovering the material conditions that depoliticization erases. The Ghost Dance did not emerge from Native superstition but from systematic American genocide. The supernatural elements were not evidence of irrationality but were desperate hopes when material resistance had failed. Wounded Knee was not battle but was massacre. The assimilation policies were not benevolent protection but were cultural genocide. Recovering these realities challenges the narratives that have obscured American responsibility for conquest and that have marginalized Native peoples for over a century.

Contemporary Implications: The Persistence of Depoliticization

The depoliticization patterns visible in the Ghost Dance case continue operating in contemporary contexts. When Indigenous peoples resist resource extraction on their lands, the resistance is often portrayed through cultural or spiritual frames—protecting sacred sites, honoring traditions—that, while true, can obscure material grievances about sovereignty, treaty rights, and economic exploitation. The framing makes it easier to dismiss resistance as romantic attachment to outdated ways rather than recognizing it as rational defense of material interests and political autonomy.

International development and humanitarian intervention discourses often deploy similar depoliticization. Conflicts in formerly colonized regions are portrayed as tribal, sectarian, or driven by ancient religious hatreds rather than as resulting from material grievances about resources, political exclusion, and economic inequality often traceable to colonial policies and to postcolonial interventions. Populations are portrayed as culturally backward or as locked in traditional ways, obscuring how contemporary conditions result from systematic exploitation and from policies designed to prevent development that might threaten Western interests.

The Ghost Dance case demonstrates that these are not new patterns but are systematic elite strategies with long histories. Recognizing the patterns enables challenging contemporary depoliticization by insisting on centering material conditions, by recovering erased contexts, by questioning narratives that blame victims for their own oppression, and by exposing how elite

powers systematically weaponize culture and religion to justify domination while obscuring their own roles in creating the conditions they claim to be ameliorating.

The Analytical Contribution: Weaponization as Distinct Mechanism

This case study contributes to the analytical framework by identifying weaponization of resistance beliefs as distinct mechanism from appropriation of existing beliefs. Elites appropriate beliefs to legitimate their own power—the British appropriated Christianity to justify empire, the Qing appropriated Confucianism to legitimate dynastic rule, American elites appropriated democratic rhetoric to justify expansion. But elites also weaponize the beliefs of resistance movements against those movements, transforming genuine spiritual responses to oppression into permanent evidence of incapacity.

The weaponization is particularly effective because it appears to be based on objective observation of beliefs that resisters actually held rather than on elite fabrication. The Xhosa did believe ancestors would return. Maji Maji participants did believe in magic water. Santhals did believe Thakur commissioned them. Ghost Dancers did believe in the renewal prophecy and in Ghost Shirts. The beliefs were real, making the weaponization seem like legitimate characterization of indigenous incapacity rather than like elite propaganda.

But the weaponization involved systematic distortion through selective emphasis and contextual erasure. The beliefs were emphasized while the material conditions producing them were erased. The supernatural elements were highlighted while the explicitly pacifist teachings were ignored. The failures of supernatural promises were used as evidence of credulity while the rational functions the beliefs served were obscured. And the beliefs were portrayed as causes of resistance rather than as responses to oppression, inverting actual causal relationships to blame victims for their own subjugation.

The Enduring Questions and the Path Forward

The Ghost Dance case leaves us with questions about resistance and about the possibilities for challenging elite power when elites have such sophisticated mechanisms for weaponizing any form of resistance against resisters. If material resistance is crushed through overwhelming force, and if spiritual resistance is weaponized as evidence of incapacity, what forms of resistance are possible that cannot be similarly exploited?

The analytical framework suggests that successful resistance requires building consciousness about how elite power operates, creating alternative institutions that cannot be easily co-opted, achieving geographic spread that prevents containment, finding elite allies who defect to support popular interests, and making appropriation or accommodation possible rather than forcing elites into total suppression. The Ghost Dance failed on several of these dimensions: it was geographically contained to reservations, it lacked elite allies, American authorities were unwilling to accommodate it because they were pursuing cultural genocide, and the supernatural elements provided ready materials for weaponization.

But the Ghost Dance also succeeded in ways that depoliticization obscured. It provided spiritual survival for populations facing genocide. It maintained cultural continuity when assimilation policies were designed to destroy culture. It created solidarity and hope when circumstances were designed to produce despair and fragmentation. It demonstrated that even comprehensive material control cannot force psychological submission and that populations will resist cultural destruction even when they have no material means to resist physical domination. These successes matter even though the movement was militarily crushed and weaponized for assimilation policies.

Moreover, the Ghost Dance lives in contemporary memory as symbol of resistance rather than as symbol of incapacity. Native peoples recovered the history of Wounded Knee as massacre rather than accepting the battle narrative. The American Indian Movement occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 deliberately invoked the 1890 massacre to highlight continuing oppression and to demand justice. Contemporary Ghost Dance ceremonies continue on some reservations as assertions of cultural continuity and spiritual sovereignty. The depoliticization succeeded in shaping dominant American narratives for over a century, but it did not succeed in completely erasing alternative memories or in preventing eventual challenges to the official accounts.

The path forward requires continuing to challenge depoliticization by recovering material contexts, by centering experiences of oppressed populations rather than narratives of elite justification, and by recognizing that what appears as cultural or religious fanaticism often represents rational responses to impossible circumstances created by those portraying themselves as civilized and rational. The Ghost Dance was not savage delusion but was spiritual resistance to genocide. Wounded Knee was not battle but was massacre. American expansion was not manifest destiny but was colonial conquest using colonial methods. Recovering these truths challenges the narratives that have obscured American responsibility and that continue to marginalize Native peoples in contemporary American society.

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END OF STUDY

This case study applies the "Analytical Framework for Elite Power and Belief Systems" to the Ghost Dance movement and Wounded Knee massacre, demonstrating how the United States deployed colonial depoliticization mechanisms identical to those used by European powers, weaponizing Native American spiritual resistance to justify violent suppression, forced assimilation, and permanent political subordination.

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